Ngoma Rhythms of Congo

The New Wave of African Drum Rhythms

Ken Wilson and Pline Mounzeo

With contributions from Batantou Dia N'Kaba,
Biza Sompa and Massengo Soutourous

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Ken Wilson and Pline Mounzeo

Kenneth H. Wilson
Professor Emeritus
Department of Medicine
Duke University
wilso003@duke.edu

Pline Mounzeo
disciplineart@yahoo.fr

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Cover art work by Ken Wilson – blended photographic exposures of nguri, a type of ngoma sometimes used for lead drum.

This monograph is dedicated to the memory of Batantou Dia N'Kaba - teacher, brilliant performer and friend, loved by many.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements……6

Preface……9

Introduction……10

The Ngoma……13

How To Hit the Drum……15

Musical Notation……18

The Rhythms……18

Air Puni……19

BaBembe……22

BaKongo……23

BaLuba……25

BaTéké……28

Baye……29

Bouanga……31

Boucher……32

Ekongo Bwanga……33

Esokata……34

Esombi……35

Fumu dia Mbombo……36

Ganza……37

Ituri Congo……42

Kimbwa……43

Kingoli……44

L'Introduction……45

Ntiawa……48

Nzobi……49

Wara……51

Zebola……52

Afterword……57

About the Authors……58

Bibliography……58

List of Maps

Map of The Republic of Congo……8

List of Illustrations

Figure 1. Pline Mounzeo playing ngoma.……9

Figure 2. Parts of the ngoma drum……11

Figure 3. Nsakalas, the rattle worn around the wrist when playing ngoma……14

Figure 4. Hitting for bass sound.……15

Figure 5. Hitting for tone sound.……16

Figure 6. Hitting for slap sound……17

Figure 7. Using silicone adhesive instead of rubber gum for njimbu.……23

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Batantou's cousin, Biza Sompa, was the founder and leader of Bichini Bia Congo and taught Ken for several years after Batantou moved to France. A world-renowned dancer who represented Africa in the Year of the Child, Biza is an accomplished drummer as well and a friend. His drum lessons went along with colorful cultural context.

Massengo Soutourous is an incredibly generous teacher who lives in Oakland. He was originally a student of Batantou's and played with the Congolese National Dance Company of Brazzaville. He moved to Oakland to be the lead drummer of Fua Dia Congo, a major dance company in Oakland, CA. He taught Ken many of the rhythms he came to know and has had many other students, including the well-known performer Tommy Agarwal.

Co-author Pline Mounzeo has also been a very effective and valued teacher and he has his own section as an author (see below).

Ken would also like to express appreciation for the support he has received over the years from several musicians in North Carolina. The late Brad Simmons was a well-known and beloved musician who lived in Durham, NC and taught in the Department of Music at Duke University. He supported Ken's efforts to introduce Congolese drumming, and sometimes played gigs with him before Pline moved to the area. He also invited Pline to teach the Duke djembe class and to put on performances with them sometimes. Ava Vinesett and her husband, Richard Vinesett, brought Congolese dance and drum rhythms respectively to the Duke Dance Program. They also were involved with Ken in studies of the benefits of drum and dance for human volunteers in a formal clinical study. When Ken's house burned to the ground in the year 2000, Freddy (Ayinde) Rivera made him an ngoma; Ayinde also had great interest in Congolese rhythms and played with him in many gigs. All these people helped Congolese rhythms to have a presence in North Carolina before the arrival of Pline Mounzeo and were encouraging.

In more recent years several drummers in the West African tradition have joined Pline and Ken in playing the music. These include Teli Shabu, Djali Cissoko, Beverly Bottsford, Ossei Appiagyei, Thomasi McDonald, Terry Lomergan and others. Georgette Adjie and Francis Ombang of Cameroon have also joined us to play gigs.

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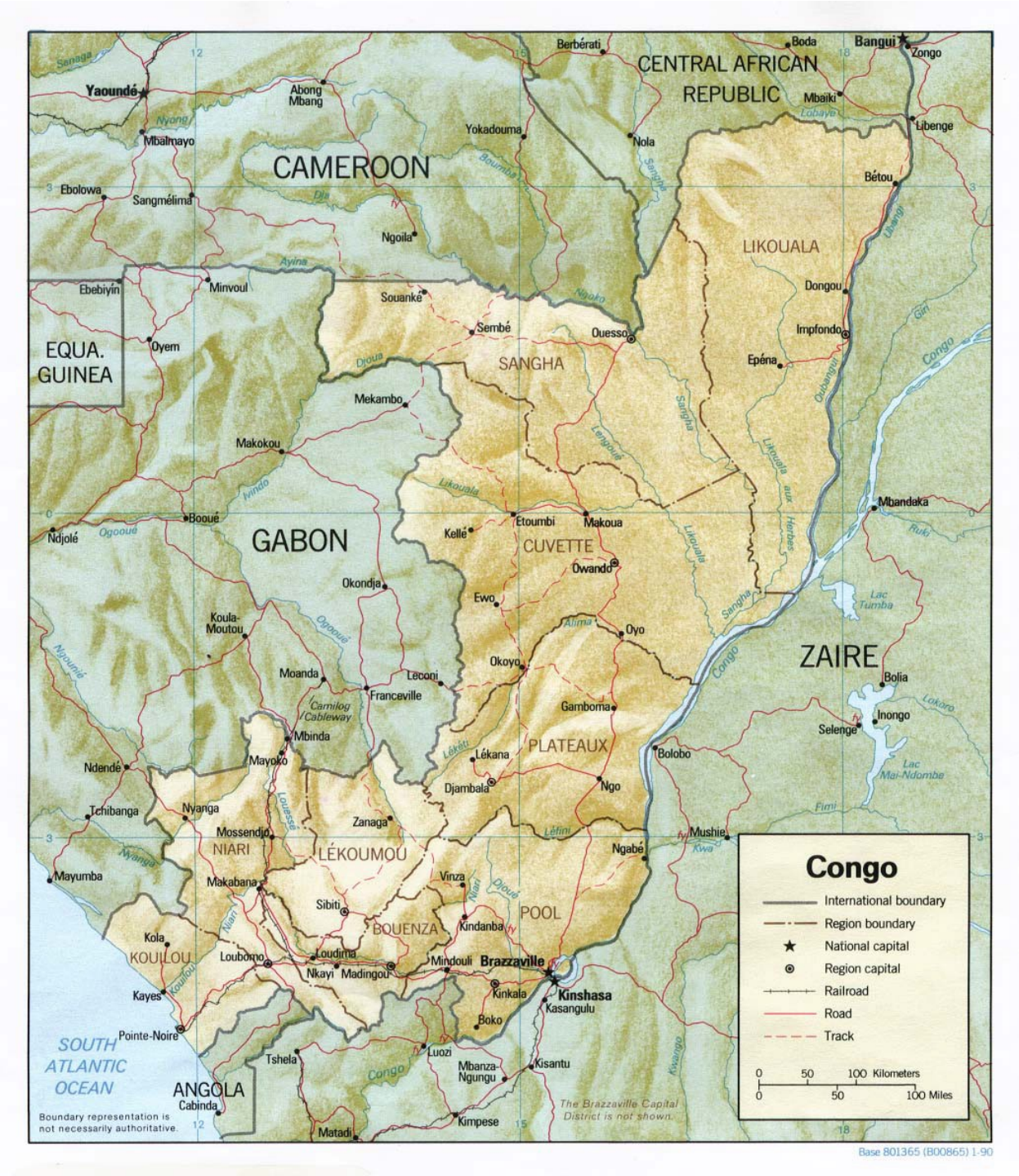


Map of the Republic of Congo from the Perry-Castañeda Library map collection. Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

Preface (by Ken Wilson)

In the winter of 1980, I attended a concert given by Biza Sompa and Batantou dia N'Kaba in a small room of the Student Union at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. It was the most inspiring music I had ever heard. The rhythms were life itself as they vibrated my hair. I could feel the drum beats go through me, bounce off the walls and then go through me again. Batantou became my first Congolese teacher and it was only later that I found out he was a legend in his own time. He was a musician who could pick up any instrument and learn it fast, but he mostly stuck with ngoma. Though I had played jazz trombone for 18 years, my experience in jazz and symphonic work had not prepared me for his requirement for precise timing. When he left Ann Arbor I studied with Biza, a dance pioneer who had represented Africa in the United Nations Year of the Child. Biza founded the dance group Bichini Bia Congo in Ann Arbor and he had a wonderful touch with the drum as well. Others who taught me in Ann Arbor included Julien Babinga and Raphael Matingou. After moving to the Research Triangle area of North Carolina in 1986, I took trips to the National Laboratory in Livermore and had the good fortune to study a couple of times with Massengo Soutourous in Oakland. He was not only a gifted drummer but a gifted and generous teacher. In the short time I was with him he taught me a remarkable amount. In 2009 Pline Mounzeo moved to Raleigh, NC. He has a thorough knowledge of the repertoire, years of experience as a performer and is widely recognized for his talent and teaching skills. At the time we met I had not realized that there were so many more rhythms and that my technique could stand so much work. Since then I have had the honor of playing with him at his local gigs – at cultural events and street fairs, in schools, at weddings, institutional events and occasionally in bars.

Figure 1. Pline Mounzeo playing ngoma.

During the time between my moving to the Research Triangle area of North Carolina and Pline's arrival I tried many times to generate local interest in Congolese drum music. There was an active West African dance group in Durham, the African American Dance Ensemble (AADE), and I served on their board of directors for a while. They had at one point recruited a drummer from Detroit who knew the Congolese rhythms Zebola and Ganza but he had died at a young age and AADE stopped doing Congolese dances. The djembe became wildly popular in the area and West African drumming was basically synonymous with African drumming in many people's minds. I could make no headway aside from arranging occasional gigs with professional drummers who were interested in learning some rhythms. I thank Ayinde Tanaka, Brad Simmons and Richard Vinesett for their efforts and camaraderie during those years. Brad told me that around here "Djembe is king" and the ngoma was just not going to catch on and he was right. Though Pline has never performed without receiving a tumultuous response, local drummers and the drum circle crowd still are smitten with the djembe and West African rhythms and have shown little interest in the Congolese tradition.

Having failed to promote this incredible music locally, I decided to write a monograph. What else can a retired physician-scientist with no charisma or marketing skills do to try and get this beautiful tradition noticed – the unique rhythms, the sonorous and powerful ngoma, the masterful drummers in this country? Maybe somewhere this monograph will act as a catalyst.

Introduction

Ngoma is a word with several related meanings. In the region of Kinshasa and Brazzaville, it means a particular type of drum made from a hollowed-out log covered at one end by an animal skin. There and in the U.S. the name differentiates it from other drums such as the djembe, conga, ashiko or dundun. Used in that sense, at least among the Bakongo people, it is derived from the words *ngo* meaning panther and *ma,* to give. In other words, it gifts the strength of the panther to the listener. Elsewhere throughout the Bantu expansion, which extends from Cameroon in the west through Tanzania in the east and down to the Cape of Good Hope, it is a generic word for drum. This book will use "ngoma" to refer to the specific drum used in the Kinshasa-Brazzaville area. The ngoma has a particularly rich sound but it is harder to master the technique than with a djembe. It has to be hit with more force and precision. This is one reason why involving a real Congolese drum teacher is helpful though the technique is very similar to that for the conga drum.

Cow skin or goat skin
Metal rings to secure skin and cords
Cords for tensioning skin (head)
Bottom metal ring to secure tensioning cods
Legs

Figure 2. Parts of the ngoma drum.

Ngoma has another meaning, though. Throughout the entire Bantu expansion *ngoma* also refers to a versatile kind of ritual. What rituals falling into this category have in common is that people come together in rhythm and dance to address difficult issues. Examples of these issues would be major life transitions, illness, community conflict, political issues or natural calamity. Ngoma societies were instrumental in helping people in the townships of South Africa come through the period of apartheid and adapt to the aftermath. What these situations have in common is that they require people to adapt in a new way. For a person in our culture the use of rhythms and dance for this purpose may seem puzzling because we have no similar tradition. What we should realize is that from the beginning, humans have used rhythm and dance in just this way. It is modern culture that is the outlier. Through mechanisms we do not understand, rhythm and dance in the right context can lead to conflict resolution and promote personal or

group adjustment to changing situations. Part of this process is that the practice can promote healing from illness or social conflict. Such rituals are often led by people who specialize in altered states of consciousness that could allow them to experience novel ways of looking at things. These rituals often worry people in our culture because they are usually tied to what anthropologists call *magicoreligious* beliefs, for instance spirit possession (typical of Bantu culture). However, to appreciate their usefulness, we can interpret these phenomena in light of our own culture and world view. For instance, we could actually experience spirit possession as a lost aspect of our own self arising into consciousness, not necessarily as an outside spirit entering us and taking control. We should note that not all rhythms in this monograph are used in ngoma rituals

Given the deep roots of many of the rhythms covered in this book, one might assume they are viewed in a protective way as sacred and off limits. That is not the case. A rhythm such as Zebola, used to help re-establish mental health, may equally well be used in a concert performance or for entertainment in a night club. In the United States there is a sizeable Congolese immigrant population but ngoma rituals are not widely practiced. This is unfortunate because work by Ava Vinesett, Ken Wilson, Pline Mounzeo and others at Duke University suggests that Americans could benefit from some version of ritual ngoma practice. The benefits seem to be similar to those of meditation.

Congolese rhythms are less well known in the U.S. than West African ones but they are equally a part of our lost heritage. Around a third of the enslaved people brought here were from Congo. Once one is familiar with the rhythms, the Congolese influence on American music is obvious. One just needs to listen to gospel music, African American drum lines and funk music such as that of James Brown. In the U.S., the ngoma drum and the traditional rhythms were first brought to our shores in the 1970's, mostly by people from the Republic of Congo (the smaller of the two Congos). They had mostly performed with or been strongly influenced by the Congolese National Dance Company of Brazzaville. The tradition is less widespread in America than that of West Africa and is concentrated in Northern California, especially Oakland, where Malonga Casquelord was successful in obtaining stable funding to establish the performing group Fua Dia Congo. One successful effort of this group has been to bring in excellent visiting teachers as well as to nurture and to recruit superb drummers and dancers to the area. Massengo Soutourous and Malonga's son, Kiazi Malonga would be examples. As noted above, Ann Arbor, Michigan, has a longstanding professional Congolese dance group, Bichini Bia Congo, founded by Biza Sompa, who often works with his brother Titos Sompa. Raleigh, NC, has a large expatriate Congolese community of course including Pline Mounzeo. New York has a group of Congolese dance enthusiasts led by Thelma Loubaki. A limited number of American natives have become proficient in these rhythms. An example would be Tommy Agarwal of Oakland, who was a child prodigy on the ngoma and has become a young man highly respected in the tradition. There are a few other Congolese drummers spread around the country. The limited distribution of teachers, though, should be less of a problem than it used to be now that Zoom is widely available.

The rhythms that the Congolese immigrants have brought represent mostly the repertoire of the national dance troupe of the smaller Congo. However, there are over 60 cultural groups in

Congo Brazzaville (Republic of Congo) and many of them live on both sides of the Congo River so are part of the larger DRC as well. In the U.S. the rhythms are played in “le spectacle” – formal performance with or without dancers – in academic centers, in clubs, at festivals, as part of cultural events, especially African American ones and in the schools as part of cultural education. Recordings by Batantou, Massengo, Pline and Kiazi are available online and by streaming. Music from the Kinshasa region of the larger Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), played in France, is often slightly different. For instance the skins used on the drums tend to be a little thicker and the lead drum parts are sometimes structured differently. The DRC tradition that we can hear is from the area near Kinshasa and there is a vast part of the country to the east with music that has mostly not been heard in the U.S.

African rhythms can be accurately represented in Western musical notation and we hope this book can be used by any musician interested in playing them. Especially we hope that the notations will enable music teachers to introduce these rhythms to students in the schools. Beyond the educational system, these rhythms offer a rich potential for creative use in conjunction with other types of music such as jazz, funk, blue grass and gospel music or styles of music yet to be born. Recombination has been the way of music around the world from the beginning.

We encourage people to understand that the notated rhythms are the basics of this style of Congolese drum music and to seek teaching input from the community of Congolese drummers to deepen their knowledge, develop finesse and learn more about playing lead drum and playing for dancers.

The Ngoma

The ngomas imported from Congo to the U.S. are made from the Nsenga tree and are called *Nsenga* (Figure 2). The wood is light and resilient enough that it is also used for making canoes. It is resonant, making for a rich sound. The ngoma is usually made with three short legs to stand on. Usually the head is from 9 inches to 12 inches in diameter and the drum is from 40 to 48 inches high. It is played standing and in Congo-Brazzaville is secured around the waist with a cloth sash and straddled, allowing the player to move around or even dance. It is good practice to make sure that at least two of the legs are supporting the weight of the drum in order not to break a drum leg. The drummer often uses small gourd rattles called *nsakalas* fastened to the wrists (Figure 3). Because of logistics and export restrictions these drums are not widely available. The “Classical Heartwood Ngoma Drum” made in Ghana and available online has an authentic sound but is much heavier than the nsenga. The conga drum is a good alternative and in fact when Bichini Bia Congo was first being established as a dance troupe, this is what they used because of lack of ngomas. The conga called *kinta* tends to be higher pitched with a slightly different timbre and Congolese players tune it lower than traditional Afro-Cuban drummers do. The ngoma does not get an optimal sound from a thick cow skin as usually used on a conga. A thick goat skin or a cow skin in the 1.5 to 2 mm thickness range is better, though some performers prefer a thinner skin for a twangy sound. Traditionally the skin is attached to the drum with tacks and is tuned by heating the head with the heat from a fire. This tightens

the skin and raises the pitch. These days most performers are using the so-called Mali tuning system widely used on djembes. Tuning by fire is still used in the village and in the streets of Brazzaville.

Figure 3. Nsakalas, the rattles worn around the wrist when playing ngoma.

How to hit the drum

The ngoma is played in a style similar to the better-known conga and if you already play conga, just use the techniques you already know. As in African drumming in general, the ngoma is hit with strength and force to make a loud sound. There are three sounds.

The bass is made by hitting the center of the drum with the hand slightly cupped. The resulting sound is a resonant thud with relatively low volume. If you want this sound to be heard, you need to hit the drum hard.

Figure 4. Hitting for bass sound

A tone is made by holding the hand flat and hitting the drum with only the fingers. The hand hits the drum hard and bounces off immediately. The resulting sound is a resonant tone with the pitch depending on the drum and how tightly the head is tuned. Some Congolese drummers make a tone with more than just the fingers hitting the drum, especially in DRC.

Figure 5. Hitting for tone sound

A slap is difficult to attain at first. The hand is held loosely so if you moved the forearm up and down the hand would flop at the wrist and the fingers are loose as well. The hand is swung down so that the thenar eminence and hypothenar eminence (the fleshy parts at the base of the hand) hit the edge of the drum as the fingers whip onto the skin. Depending on the effect desired, the fingers can bounce off the drum (open slap) or stay momentarily on the drum head (closed slap). Performers tend to like the loud sharp sound of the open slap though the more rich and restrained sound of the closed slap is used more in the village. If you already play djembe and can get a good slap, trying the technique you already know on the ngoma is likely to work.

Figure 6. Hitting for slap sound

It can take a lot of practice to get good sounds out of a hand drum. If you want to sound good, being critical of your playing but not self-punitive is a good idea. There are a lot of examples of ngoma music on YouTube now. Watching the techniques of the good drummers and hearing how they sound can be very helpful. One useful thing to know is that if you tune the drum down so that it is relatively low pitched, it will be easier to make a good tone. If you tighten the skin so that it is relatively high pitched it will be easier to make a good slap. Hopefully there is a sweet spot where tone and slap are both achievable. As you become more experienced that sweet spot will expand; a really good drummer can produce a tone or slap however the drum is tuned.

Another interesting factor in tuning is that a given ngoma will “like” certain pitches. Starting with a loose skin, if you tighten it bit by bit and notice the sound, you will see that it gets stuck at certain pitches. If it is sounding good at a certain pitch, as you tighten further the tonal quality will start to deteriorate, then the drum will move up to another pitch that it “likes” and sound good again. As you tighten the head further, the pitch again does not change for a while. For those interested, this probably has to do with the length of the drum and the harmonic overtone series that it generates. Many professional Congolese musicians do not pay much attention to tuning of their drum. The precision of their rhythm, though, is more exact than that of a symphonic or jazz musician.

Musical notation

Western time signatures work well to notate African music. Therefore, each rhythm is notated with a standard time signature. However, the American ear may not assign the correct tempo beat – the beat to which the dancers would be dancing. For that reason, the tempo beat will also be notated as a vertical line or exclamation point. The music is written on a standard musical stanza with a bass beat placed on what would be the note F in the treble clef, a tone placed on what would be the note B and a slap placed where the note E would be. The cultural context of each rhythm when available will be discussed with the rhythm.

Because many people who play hand drums are not familiar with standard musical notation, the rhythms are also written using a Time Unit Box System (TUBS). In this notation each box represents a unit of time, usually half a beat, a quarter of a beat or a third of a beat. The tempo beat (that dancers would be dancing to) is represented by an exclamation mark at the top of the score. “B” represents bass, “T” tone and “S” slap. In this version of TUBS, there is sometimes more than one drumbeat per time unit. These notes should be played at equal intervals except that “tT” or “sS” represent a flam. “0” represents a rest or beat that is not played.

For those not very familiar with African rhythms, these rhythms are played as repetitive rhythm loops except for calls, breaks and introductions. Tempo refers to the tempo beat, the beat to which the dancers dance.

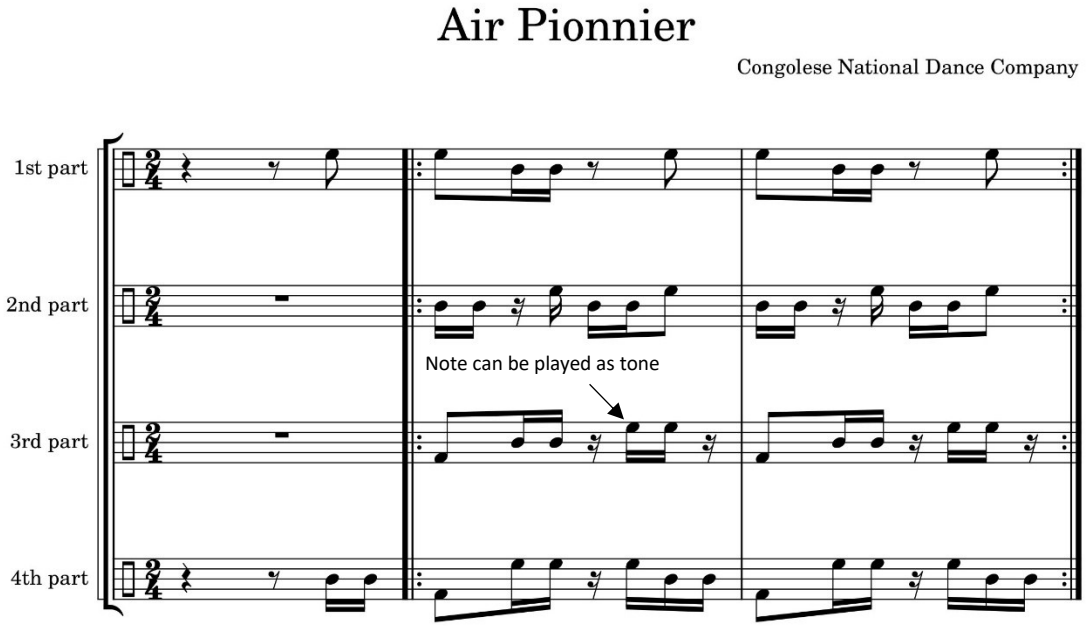
The Rhythms

As noted above, there are over 60 cultural groups in the Republic of Congo. Most of the people who have come to the United States are from the Brazzaville area and do not know the traditions of other cultural groups in the countryside. As a result, it has not been possible to determine the cultural significance of all the rhythms presented here. On the other hand, some of the rhythms are from well-studied cultural practices (e.g. Zebola and Ganza). Possibly future editions of this monograph will contain further cultural information.

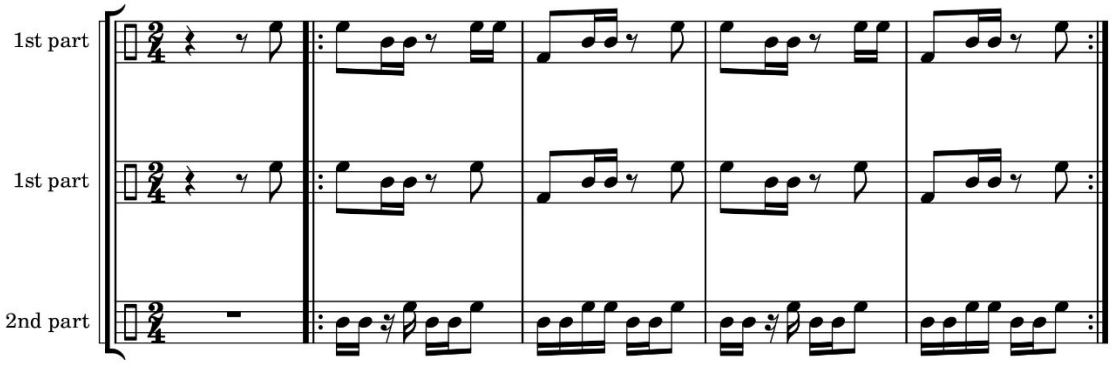
Many of these rhythms are fluid. This monograph does not necessarily contain every part ever played with a given rhythm and experienced drummers modify some of the parts or improvise variations as they play them. It is a living tradition.

Air Pionnier

Air Pionnier is not a traditional rhythm from the villages but arose early in the history of the Congolese National Dance Company of Brazzaville. According to Biza Sompa, who was a member of the company in the early 1970's, it started as "Air Puni". The Puni drummers were the novice drummers, so named (French for "punished") because they were hazed at the time. Two groups had a dispute about whether to be playing Kimbwa or Bakongo. They compromised by coming up with Air Puni. However, one is struck immediately by how similar this rhythm is to the traditional rhythm known as Kuku from Guinea.

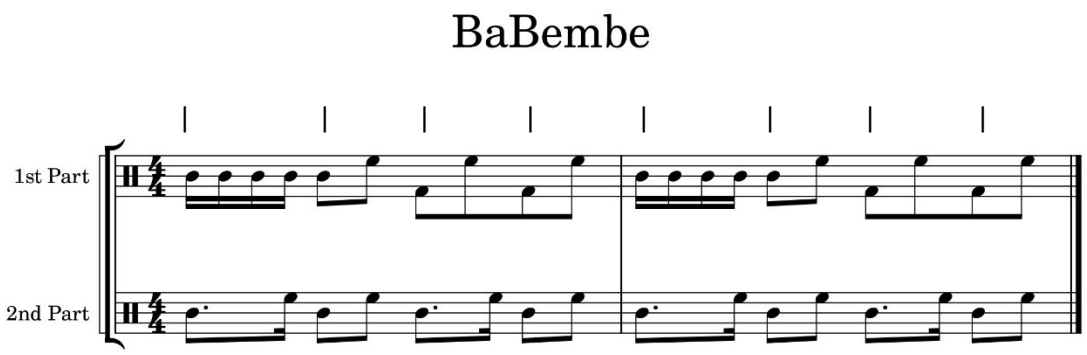
Presently in Congo the rhythm is called Air Pionnier. It is a rhythm for students and is used to start the school day. It is played fast to crazy fast. If you are having trouble keeping up on the second part, play just the tones because it is important that they sound good.

			!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!	
1st part		Slap	S			S	S			S	S			S	S			S
		Tone		TT				TT				TT				TT		
		Bass																
2nd part		Slap		0S		S		0S		S		0S		S		0S		S
		Tone	TT		TT		TT		TT		TT		TT		TT		TT	
		Bass																
3rd part		Slap							S								S	
		Tone			T	T		T*					T	T		T*		
		Bass	B								B							
						* Sometimes played as slap												
4th part		Slap		SS	0S			SS	0S			SS	0S			SS	0S	
		Tone				TT				TT				TT				TT
		Bass	B				B				B				B			
			Remember that 0 means nothing is played for the time unit represented. In this case the slap comes half way through the time unit; it is delayed.															

Air Pionnier Variations

Congolese National Dance Company

			!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!	
1st part		Slap	S				SS				S	S			SS			S
		Tone		TT				TT					TT				TT	
		Bass						B								B		
1st part		Slap	S				S				S	S			S			S
		Tone		TT				TT					TT				TT	
		Bass						B								B		
2nd part		Slap		0S			S		SS		S		0S			S		SS		S
		Tone	TT		TT			TT		TT				TT			TT		TT	
		Bass																		

BaBembe

This rhythm is the signature rhythm of the Bembe people, who live in the southern Republic of Congo north of the Congo river. It is a moderately fast rhythm.



		!				!				!				!			
1st part	Slap							S				S				S	
	Tone	T	T	T	T	T				T				T			
	Bass																
2nd part	Slap				S			S					S			S	
	Tone	T				T				T				T			
	Bass																

Note: slaps in the first part are optional.

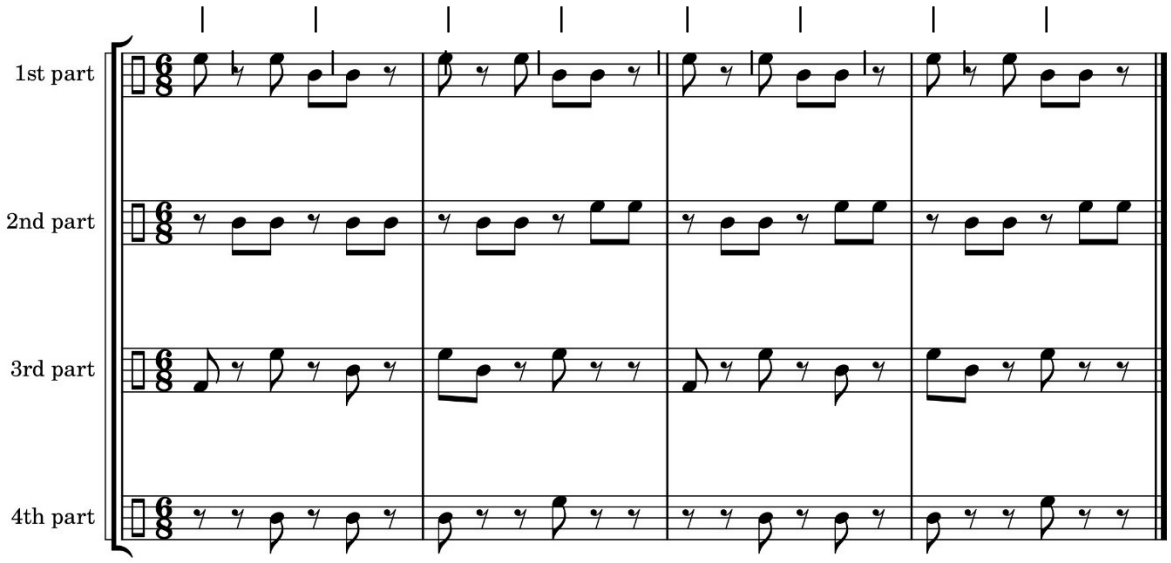
BaKongo

BaKongo is the signature rhythm of the Kongo people, who live in the region of Kinshasa and Brazzaville on both sides of the Congo River. It is played moderately fast. Per Batantou it was initially a rhythm for ceremonies to create fetishes but has grown into a general purpose rhythm for many kinds of social occasions such as marriages or festivals. Although there are four parts, it is often played with only the first two parts. Typically, the lead drum plays with “njimbu”, a piece of rubber gum adhered to the middle of the drum skin to give the drum a lower pitched “boing” sound. As rubber gum is not easily available in the U.S., the sound can be simulated by placing silicon adhesive in the middle of the drum.

Figure 7. Placing silicone adhesive on head of ngoma in place of rubber gum not available in U.S. The exact placement is adjusted by ear and depends on the size of drum head, skin thickness and material being used.

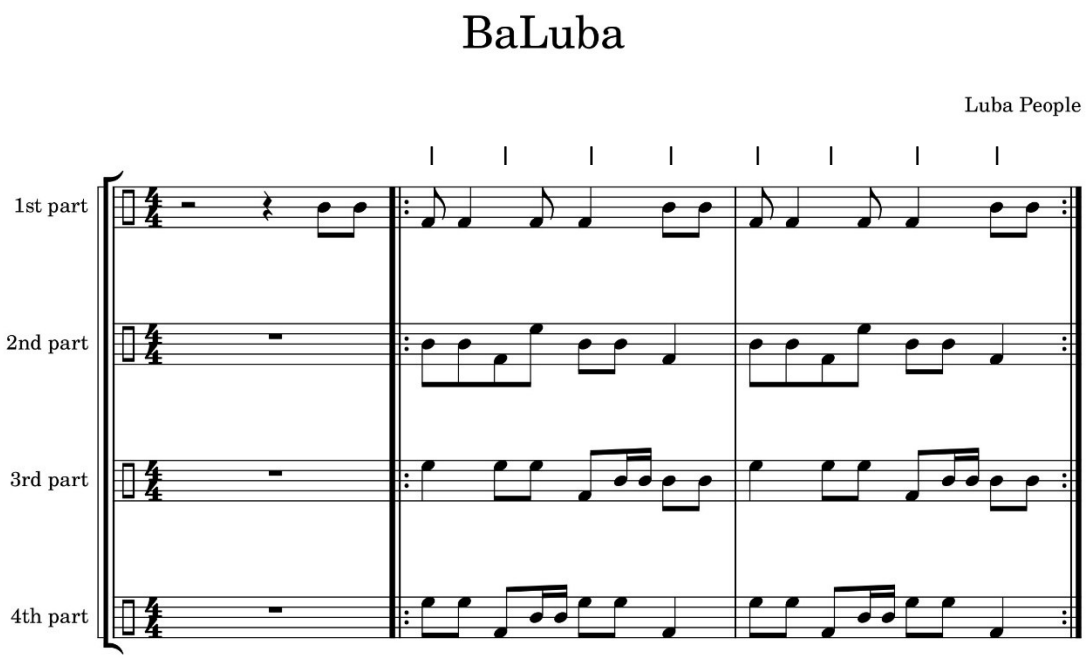
The fourth part is called “kebélé kebélé”, a part found in several other Congolese rhythms. Although it is simple in concept it is difficult to master.

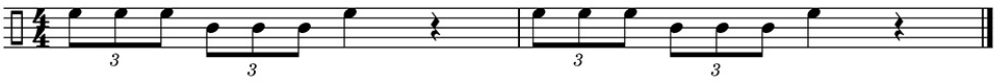
BaKongo

Kongo people

Note: 2nd part can be played with only tones or slaps can be added ad lib.

			!			!			!			!			!			!			!			!		
1st part		slap	S			S						S			S						S			S		
		tone					T	T						T	T					T	T					T	T
		bass																									
2nd part		slap																									
		tone		T	T		T	T		T	T		T	T		T	T		T	T		T	T				
		bass																									
3rd part		slap			S				S			S					S				S			S		
		tone					T			T									T			T					
		bass	B												B												
4th part		slap										S													S		
		tone			T		T		T								T		T		T						
		bass																									

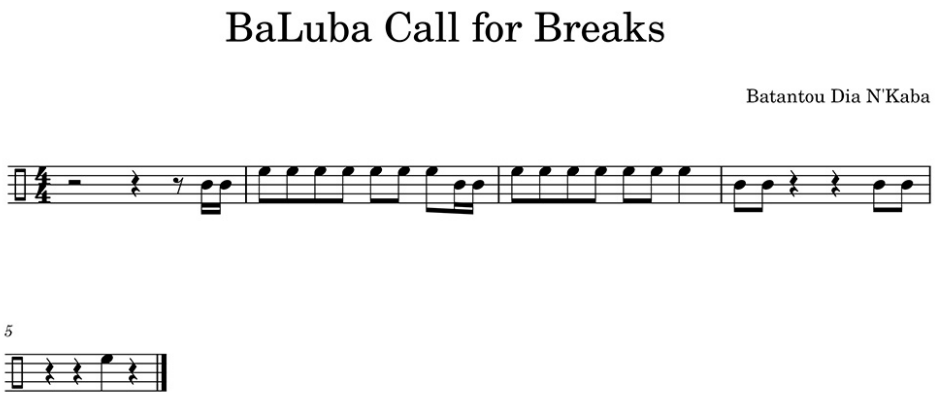
BaLuba

Baluba (which means “Luba people”) is also called Mutuashi. It is the signature rhythm of the Luba people of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Parts of it can be heard in the well-known musical piece, Missa Luba. Take your time with BaLuba, around 125 beats per minute.

			!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		
1st part		Slap																	
		Tone							T	T							T	T	
		Bass	B	B		B	B				B	B		B	B				
2nd part		Slap				S								S					
		Tone	T	T			T	T			T	T			T	T			
		Bass							B								B		
3rd part		Slap	S		S	S					S		S	S					
		Tone						TT	T	T						TT	T	T	
		Bass					B								B				
4th part		Slap	S	S			S	S			S	S			S	S			
		Tone				TT								TT					
		Bass			B				B				B				B		

BaLuba Call

	!			!			!			!			!			!			!		
Slap	S	S	S				S						S	S	S			S	
Tone				T	T	T										T	T	T	
Bass																			

At the beginning of the rhythm, the lead drummer plays the call. Picking up on the last beat of the two measures above, the rest of drummers in unison play the first two measures of part one leaving out the last two eighth notes. The lead drummer then plays the call again and once again the rest of the drummers play the first part in unison as before then continue on playing their respective rhythms. At the end of playing the rhythm, the lead drummer plays the call again and the playing ends with drummers again playing two measures of the first part, leaving

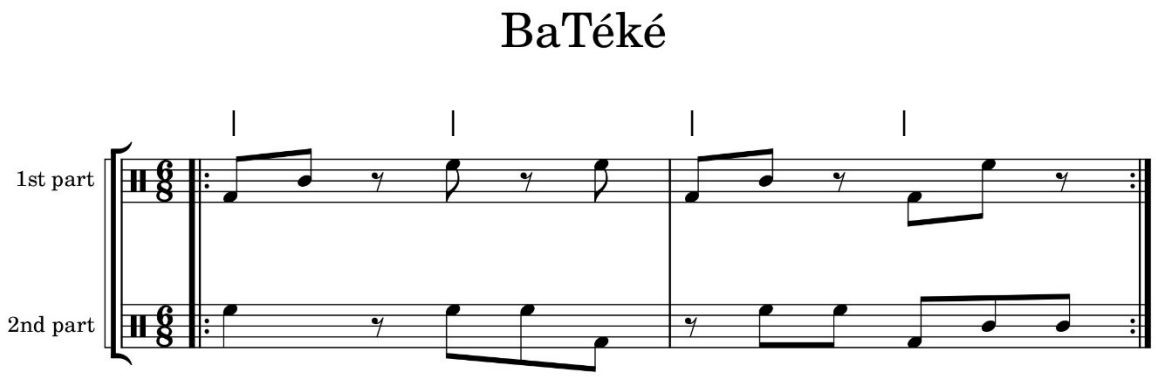
out the last two eighth notes. A variety of breaks can be played in unison during the rhythm and a different call has been used for these, at least by Batantou dia N'Kaba (shown below).



	!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!	
Slap					S	S	S	S	S	S	S		S	S	S	S	S	S	S	
Tone				TT								TT								
Bass																				
Slap													S							
Tone	T	T					T	T									Pick up rhythm here			
Bass																				

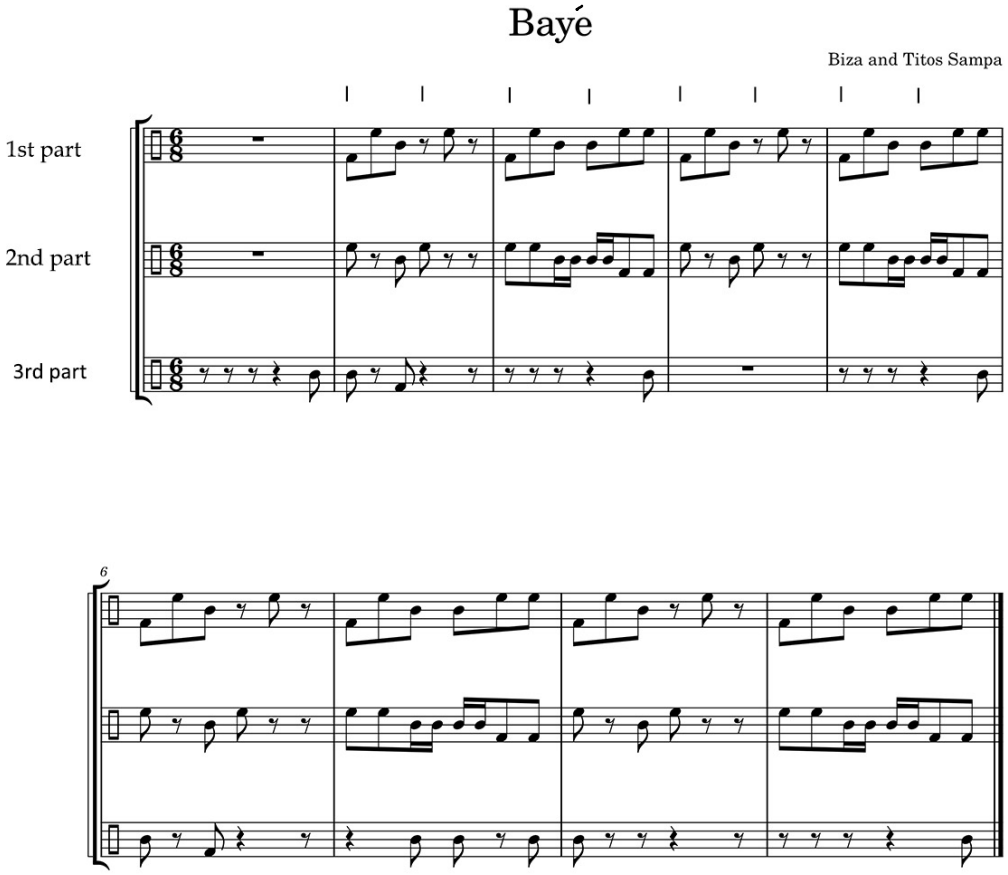
BaTéké

BaTéké is the signature rhythm of the Téké people, a cultural group from southern Republic of Congo in the region near Brazzaville. It is slow, around 100 beats per minute.



		!			!			!			!		
1st part	Slap				S		S					S	
	Tone		T						T				
	Bass	B						B			B		
2nd part	Slap	S			S	S			S	S			
	Tone											T	T
	Bass						B				B		

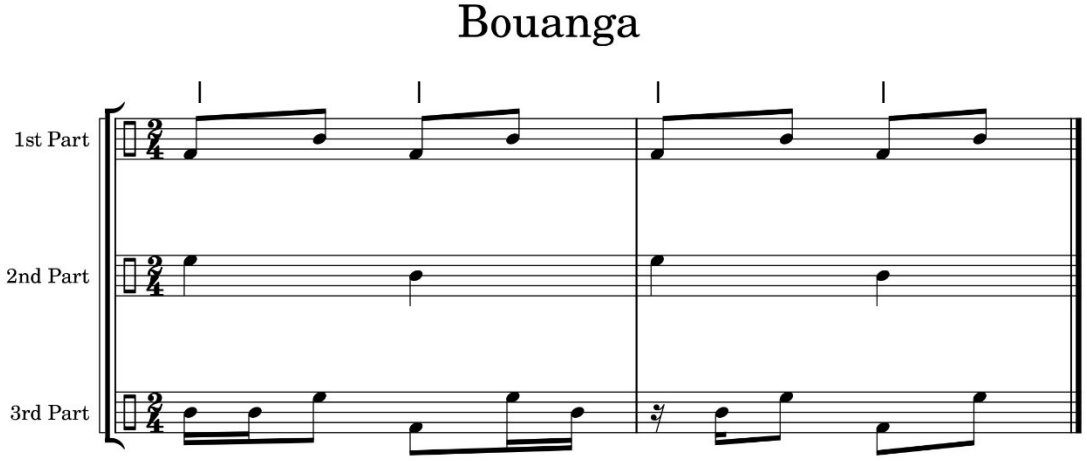
Bayé

In the early days of Congolese drumming in the U.S., there was a lack of both experienced drummers and of drums. Conga drums were often used instead of ngomas. Sometimes no one knew all the parts. Baye, meaning “they are coming” arose in such a situation. It was used in a dance in which people were coming to visit a village and it was based on the rhythm Esokata but it had some differences. The first part of Esokata was modified and the other two parts were quite different. The tempo is around 105 beats per minute.

		*	!			!			!			!			!			!			!			!			!		
1st part	Slap			S			S			S				S		S			S			S			S		S	S
	Tone											T	T													T	T		
	Bass		B			T			B						B		T				B							
2nd part	Slap		S				S			S	S					S			S			S	S					
	Tone				T							TT	TT					T						TT	TT			
	Bass													B	B												B	B
3rd part	Slap																											
	Tone	T	T												T													T
	Bass				B																							
		*Part 3 pickup at start																										
3rd part																												
cont'd			T									T	T		T	T												T
					B																							

Bouanga

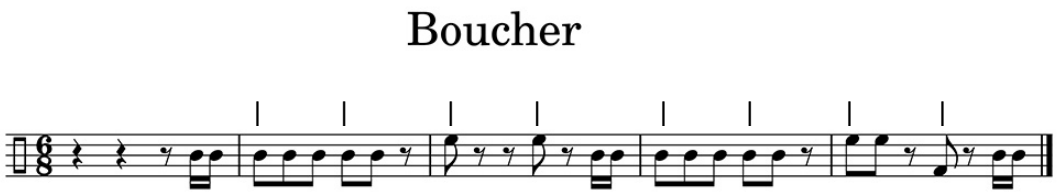
Bouanga is said to have originated in the village of Linzolo in the Pool region of southern Republic of Congo. It is played widely in the southern part of this country particularly in the presence of the village chief to dramatize his influence and power. It is also played at funerals.

The first two parts of Bouanga are very simple and a good place to start for a beginning drummer. The third part is more complex and is actually the foundational rhythm for a lead drum. Bwanga is traditionally played at a medium tempo of around 110 beats per minute.



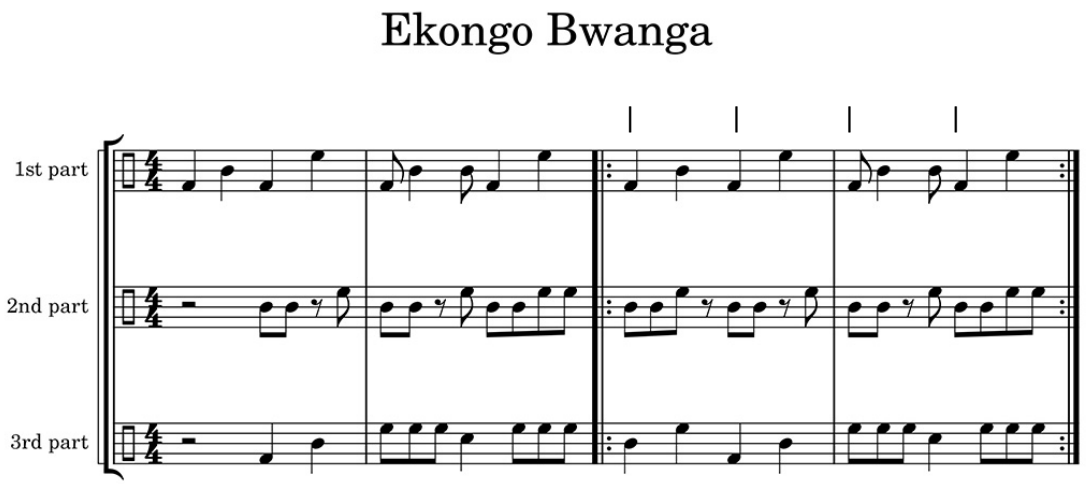
			!		!		!		!	
1st Part		Slap								
		Tone		T		T		T		T
		Bass	B		B		B		B	
2nd Part		Slap	S				S			
		Tone			T				T	
		Bass								
3rd Part		Slap		S		S		S		S
		Tone	T T			T	0 T		T	
		Bass			B					

Boucher

In the mid 20th century, there was a rhythm played when meat became available for sale in Brazzaville. The rhythm is entitled “Boucher”, French for butcher. The rhythm goes well with the first part of Zebola and some in the U.S. have called this combination of rhythms “nganga”. A nganga is a traditional healer and the combination of these rhythms is not traditionally associated with healing. It is maybe an urban legend started by someone with a dramatic flare (who will go unnamed). Boucher has sometimes been used as an introduction at the beginning of a show and it is played in unison. The tempo is usually around 110 beats per minute.

		!			!			!			!	
Slap								S			S	
Tone	TT	T	T	T	T	T						
Bass												
Slap								S	S			
Tone	TT	T	T	T	T	T						
Bass											B	

Ekongo Bwanga

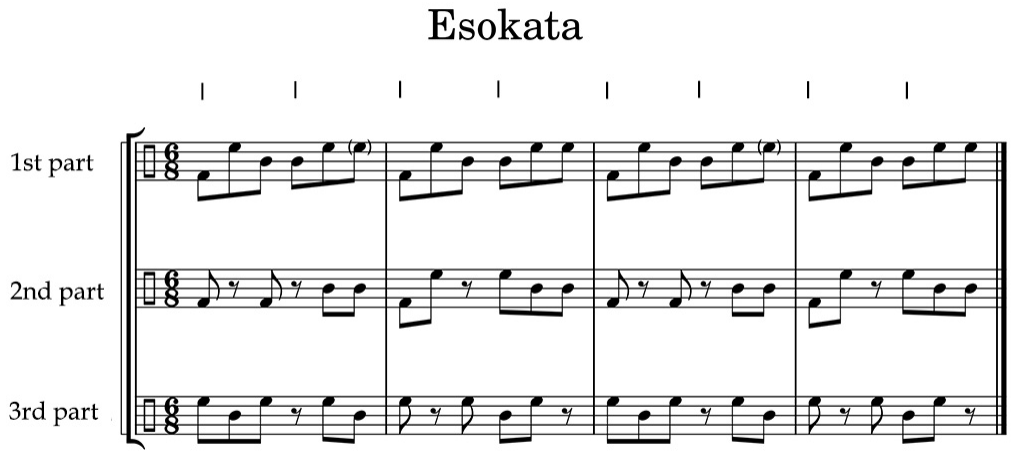
This is a traditional rhythm of the Cuvette Centrale region of the Republic of Congo. The tempo is around 120 beats per minute.



		!*		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!
1st part	Slap			S								S						S								S						
	Tone						T		T							T							T		T						T	
	Bass	B				B				B				B				B				B				B				B			
2nd part	Slap				S				S			S	S			S				S				S			S	S			S		
	Tone	T	T			T	T			T	T			T	T			T	T			T	T			T	T			T	T		
	Bass																																
3rd part	Slap					S	S	S			S	S	S			S							S	S	S			S	S	S			S	
	Tone			T					T					T						T				T						T			
	Bass	B																B															
	* At the very beginning, the first part should play a a pick-up:																																
		!		!		!		!																									
	Slap							S																									
	Tone			T																													
	Bass	B				B																											
		→	→	→	→	↑ 2nd and 3rd parts come in.																													
		Pickup shown by arrows																															

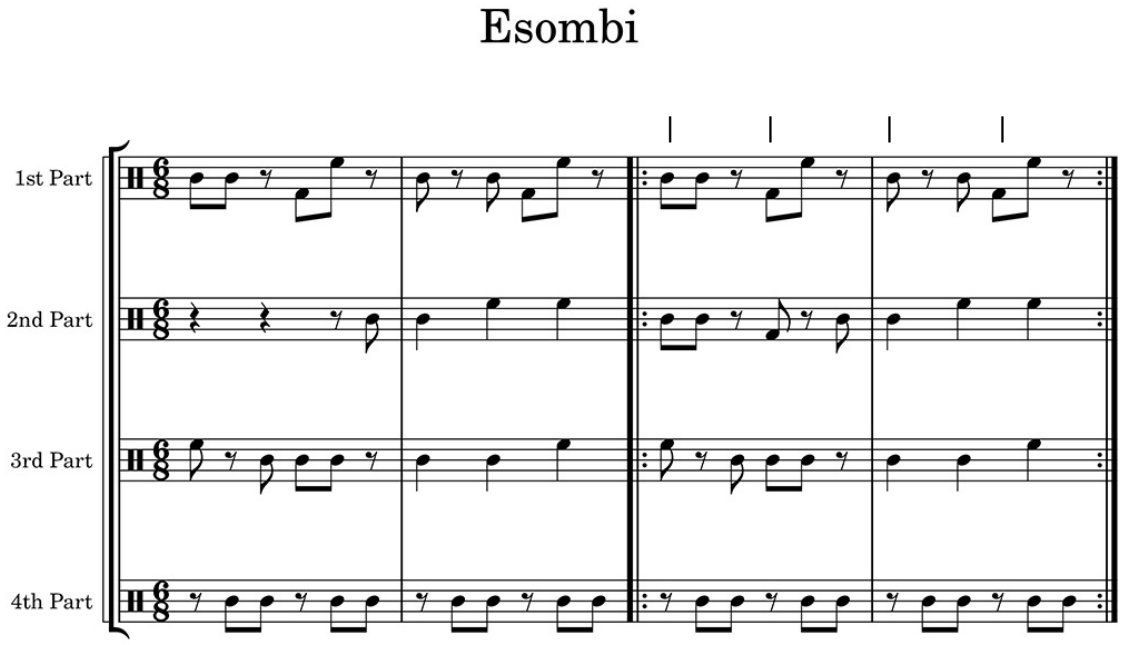
Esokata

Esokata is a social dance. Note that the first and second measure of the first part are identical but can be played as a call and response by omitting one of the slaps in the first measure (shown as parentheses). Also, in practice, one can leave the second slap out more or less at random. Around 105 beats per minute works well.



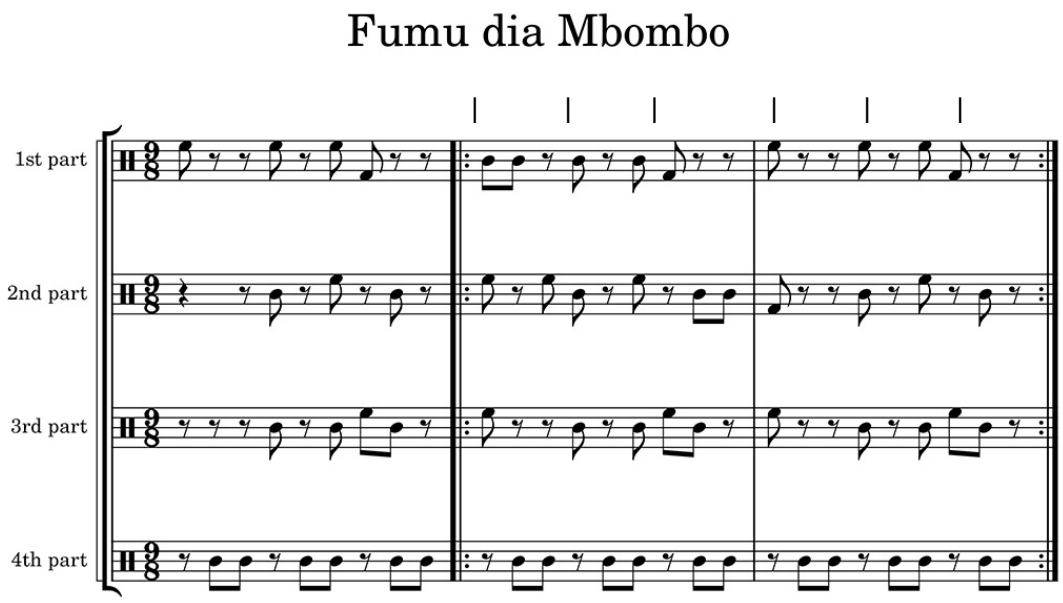
		!			!			!			!			!			!			!			!		
1st part	Slap		S			S	(S)*		S			S	(S)*		S			S	(S)*		S			S	(S)*
	Tone																								
	Bass	B		T	T			B		T	T			B		T	T			B		T	T		
							*Can choose to do slap or not																			
2nd part	Slap								S		S										S		S		
	Tone					T	T					T	T					T	T					T	T
	Bass	B		B				B						B		B				B					
3rd part	Slap	S		S		S		S		S		S		S		S		S		S		S		S	
	Tone		T				T				T				T				T				T		
	Bass																								

Esombi

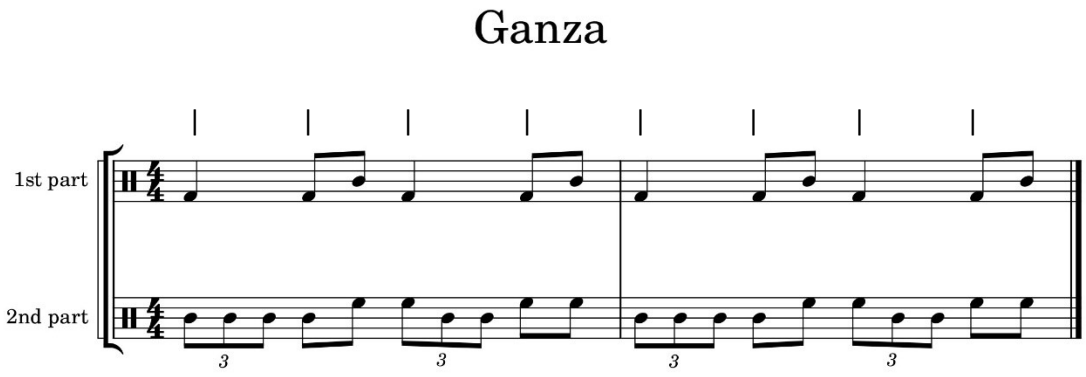
Esombi is a traditional rhythm used to accompany warfare but today is used to accompany athletic competition, especially a game that resembles Suma wrestling. A similar rhythm is played in Guinea. It is played fast, around 150 beats per minute.

		!			!			!			!			!			!			!			!		
1st part	Slap					S						S					S						S		
	Tone	T	T					T		T				T	T				T		T			
	Bass				B												B								
											B											B			
2nd part	Slap									S		S										S		S	
	Tone	(T)	(T)				T	T						T	T				T	T					
	Bass				(B)												B								
3rd part	Slap	S										S		S										S	
	Tone			T	T	T		T		T						T	T	T		T		T			
	Bass																								
4th part	Slap		T	T		T	T		T	T		T	T		T	T		T	T		T	T		T	T
	Tone																								
	Bass																								

Parentheses indicate that when the second part comes in it leaves out these notes; otherwise the notes are played.

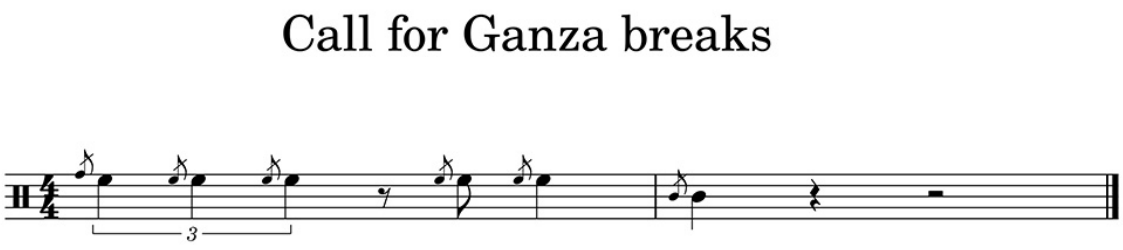
Fumu dia Mbombo

Fumu dia Mbombo, meaning smoke in the nose, is a traditional rhythm of the Bakongo people. It is usually played fast, around 160 beats per minute.

		!			!			!			!			!			!			!			!			!			!			!		
1st part	Slap	S			S			S												S			S			S							
	Tone										T	T		T		T											T	T		T		T		
	Bass								B																		B							
																	B															B		
2nd part	Slap						S				S		S			S								S			S			S				
	Tone				T									T				T	T			T							T				T	T
	Bass	(B)							T										B						T									
3rd part	Slap	(S)						S			S					S		S							S			S					S	
	Tone				T		T		T					T		T	T					T		T					T		T		T	
	Bass																																	
4th part	Slap																																	
	Tone		T	T		T	T		T	T		T	T		T	T	T	T		T	T		T	T		T	T		T	T		T	T	T
	Bass																																	
		() - not played on first entry of drum, which comes in on the second beat at the beginning																																

Ganza

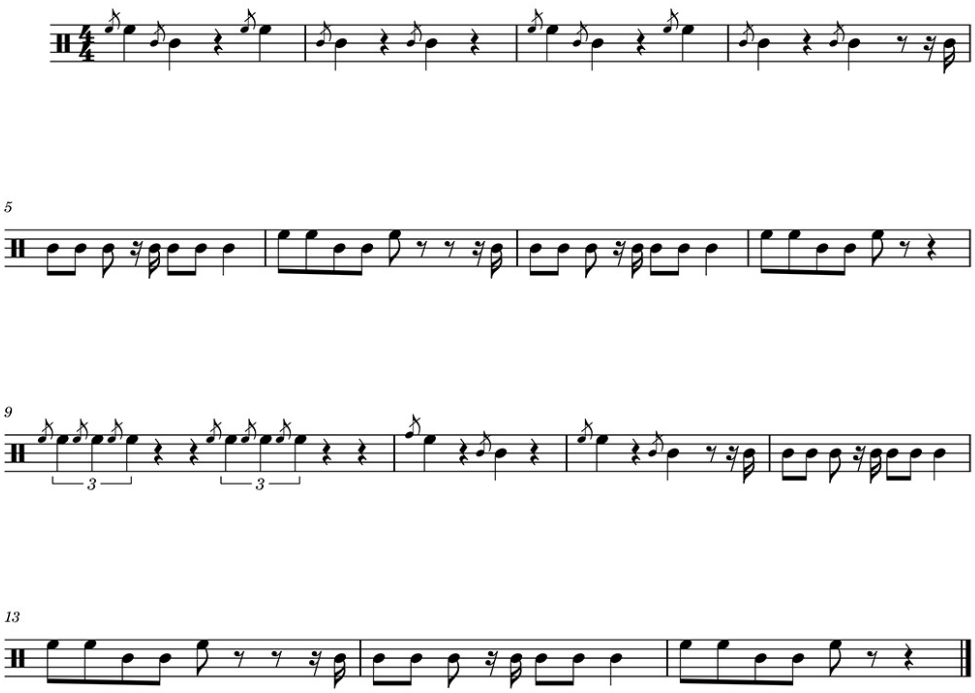
Ganza or *Gaza* (“that which gives strength”) is a coming of age rite of the Ngbaka people and the Banda people. Both peoples are part of the Ubangi cultural group and live in northern DRC and Central African Republic. The weeks long initiation process, undertaken in the forest, includes circumcision for the boys/men and clitorectomy for the girls/women (“female circumcision”, not a widely done procedure in Congo-Brazzaville). It is likely that there are multiple versions of Ganza; for instance a recording at the Smithsonian collection (https://folkways.si.edu/central-african-republic/world/music/album/smithsonian) made of a Banda performance in 1983 is different from the rhythm played by the Brazzaville National Dance Company, though it also has similarities. In its indigenous form it is played on log drums. Also, the dance itself has changed substantially over the years. Ganza came to Brazzaville through cultural exchange and became a part of the Brazzaville tradition in that way, still tied to a dance representing a coming-of-age ritual. The version presented below is the Brazzaville interpretation of a rhythm played at the time of male circumcision. It is an intense rhythm played with a rapid tempo of up to 170 beats per minute.

		!		!		!		!	
1st part	Slap								
	Tone				T				T
	Bass	B		B		B		B	
2nd part*	Slap				S	S		S	S
	Tone	T	T	T	T		T	T	
	Bass								
*Note sets of triplets over one tempo beat									

A couple of breaks can be played with Ganza. The call for the breaks is as follows:

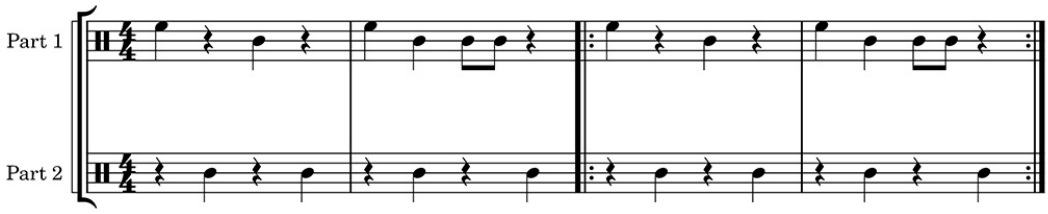


		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!	
1st part	Slap																
	Tone				T				T				T				T
	Bass	B		B		B		B		B		B		B		B	
Call	Slap	sS		s S		s S		sS	sS								
	Tone									tT				→ Break starts here			
	Bass																
		#Note broad triplets or slaps (triplets over 2 beats)															
	1st part is for reference. The break starts with slaps forming a broad triplet over two temp beats.																
	All drum notes are played with a flam (grace note, lower case).																

The first break starts on the third beat of the last measure of the break but will be notated as starting on a new measure. If both drummers know the break, they can play it in unison. Otherwise one drummer can continue playing the first part. Tempo is maintained through the first break. There are further variations on this break should it be played twice that are not shown here.

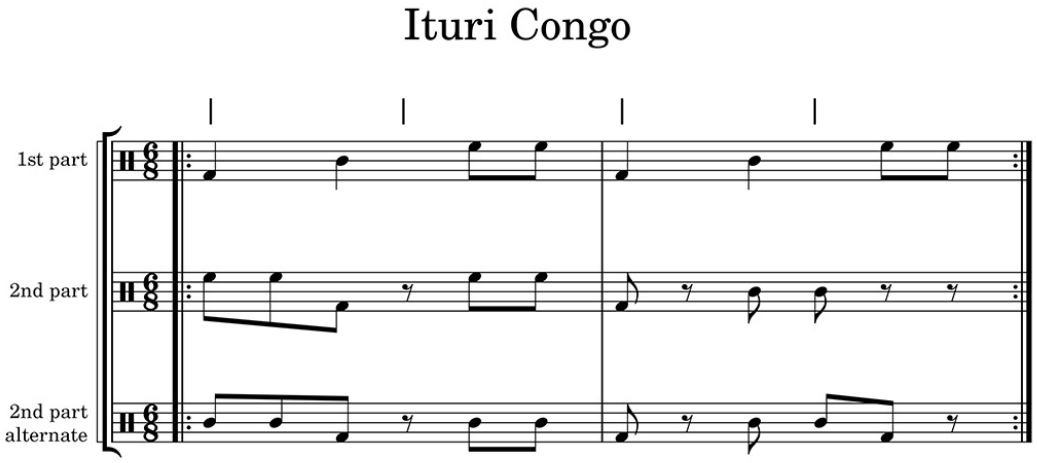
Ganza First Break

	!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!	
Slap	sS						sS										sS						sS							
Tone			tT						tT				tT						tT						tT				tT	
Bass																														
	!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!	
Slap										S	S				S												S	S		
Tone		* T	T	T	T	*T	T	T	T				T	T				* T	T	T	T	*T	T	T	T				T	T
Bass																														
		* Played half way through the beat as a 16th note pickup																												
	!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!	
Slap	S				#sS		sS		sS				#sS		sS		sS						sS						sS	
Tone																									tT					
Bass																														
					#Note broad triplets (triplets over 2 beats)																										
	!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!	
Slap											sS								sS											
Tone			tT				tT								tT						tT				tT				* T	
Bass																														
	!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!	
Slap									S	S			S										S	S			S			
Tone	T	T	T	*T	T	T	T				T	T				* T	T	T	T	*T	T	T	T				T	T		
Bass																														
	!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!		!	
Slap						S	S		S	S																				
Tone			T	T	T	T			T	T			etc.																	
Bass																														
			Regular rhythm restarts here																											

After the first break, the first and second parts resume. The second break is called with the same call as the first. However, the second break is played at a slower tempo for dramatic effect at around 120 beats per minute. It is played repetitively until the lead drummer calls back the Ganza rhythm.

Ganza Second Break

| | | ! | | ! | | !

Ituri Congo

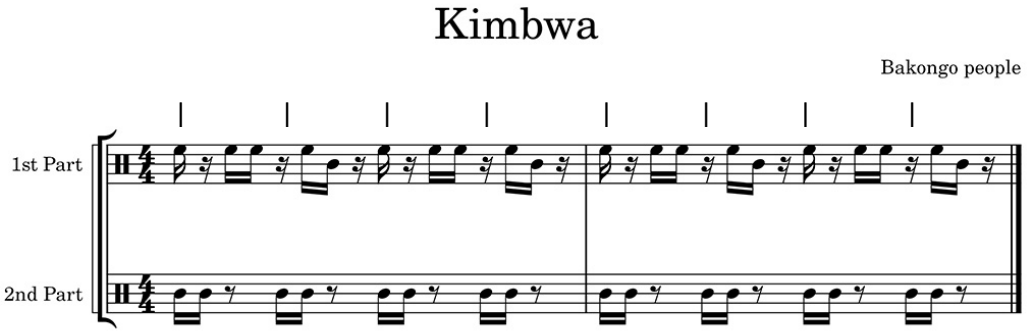
The Ituri Forest is in the eastern DRC. The authors were unable to find information about the sources of this rhythm and whether or not it has anything to do with the Ituri Forest or its people. The tempo is around 140 beats per minute.



1st part	Slap						S	S					S	S					S	S						S	S
	Tone			T						T					T			T					T				
	Bass	B						B				B					B					B					
2nd part	Slap									S	S													S	S			
	Tone	T	T			T	T							T	T			T	T									
	Bass			B				B								B				B								
2nd part	Slap																											
alternate	Tone	T	T			T	T			T	T			T	T			T	T			T	T					
	Bass			B				B				B				B				B					B			

Kimbwa

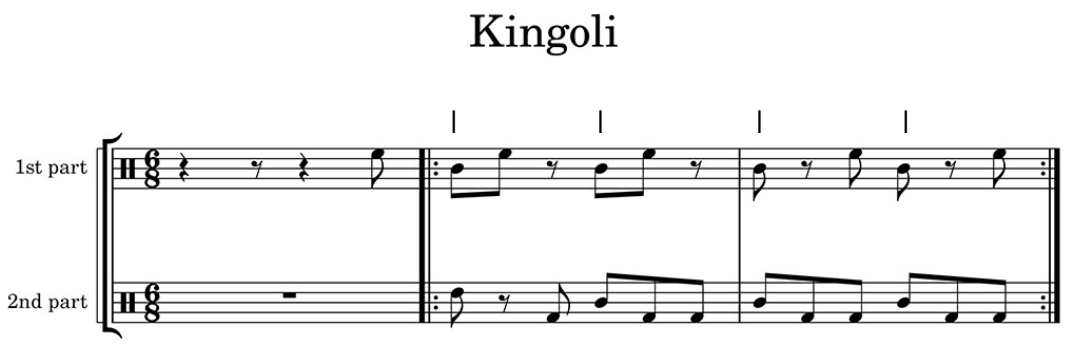
Kimbwa is a traditional rhythm of the Bakongo people. It is a social rhythm played at weddings and other social gatherings. The tempo is fast, around 145 beats per minute.



		!				!				!				!			
1st part	Slap	S		S	S		S			S		S	S		S		
	Tone							T								T	
	Bass																
2nd part	Slap																
	Tone	T	T			T	T			T	T			T	T		
	Bass																

Kingoli

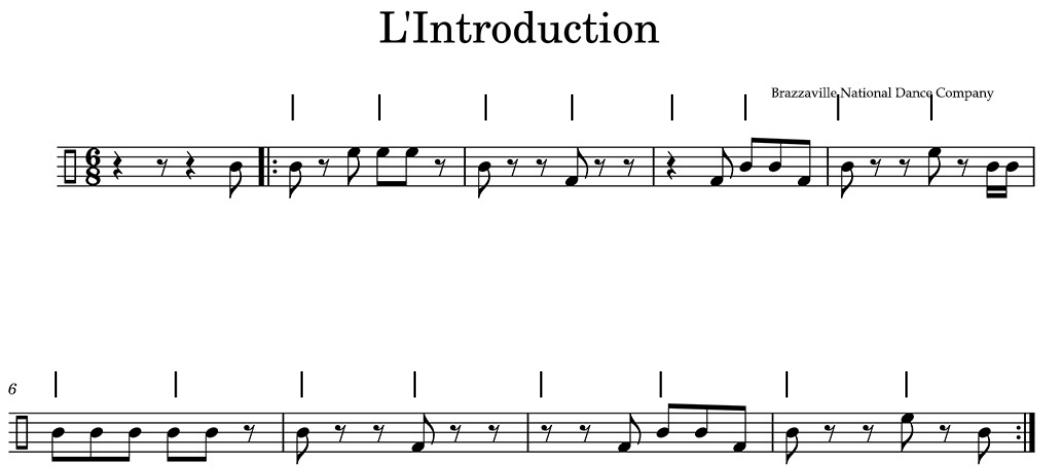
Kingoli is a traditional rhythm from Makoua, a village in the Eastern Basin region of the Republic of Congo, which sits on the equator at the southern edge of the rainforest. The tempo is moderate, around 120 beats per minute.



		!			!			!			!			!			!			!			!				
1st part	Slap		S			S			S			S			S		S			S			S				S
	Tone	T			T			T			T			T			T			T			T			T		
	Bass																											
2nd part	Slap																											
	Tone	T			T			T			T			T			T			T			T			T		
	Bass			B		B	B			B	B		B	B				B		B	B			B	B			B	B

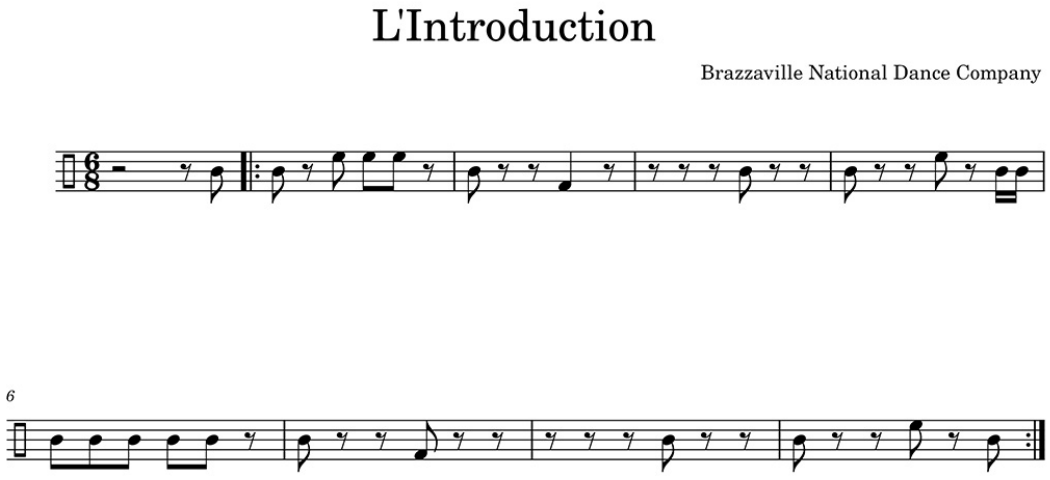
L'Introduction

L'introduction is a rhythm with which to start off a show. It is generally played in unison though accompanying it with the first part of Zebola works. Per Biza Sompa it was derived from a rhythm played on a log drum stationed in a tree so the sound would carry far. In that context it signaled the beginning of a message being sent through drum language from village to village. The tempo is moderate, around 115 beats per minute.



	!			!			!			!			!			!			!			!			!		
Slap						S	S	S																S		
Tone			(T)*	T						T								T	T		T					TT
Bass													B				B			B						
			* pickup																								

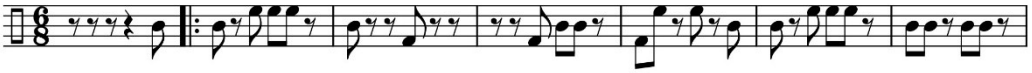
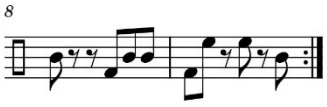
	!			!			!			!			!			!			!			!					
Slap																						S				
Tone	T	T	T	T	T		T									T	T		T					(T)*		
Bass										B							B		B							
																								*same pickup as above		

There is a previous version. It can be heard on a Ballet Kodia recording made in France in the 1970's and is the version taught by Raphael Matingou in the early 1980's. The version is shown below:

	!			!			!			!			!			!			!			!			!		
Slap						S	S	S																S		
Tone			(T)*	T						T									T			T					TT
Bass													B														

	!			!			!			!			!			!			!			!					
Slap																						S					
Tone	T	T	T	T	T		T									T			T					(T)*			
Bass										B																	
																								*same pickup as above			

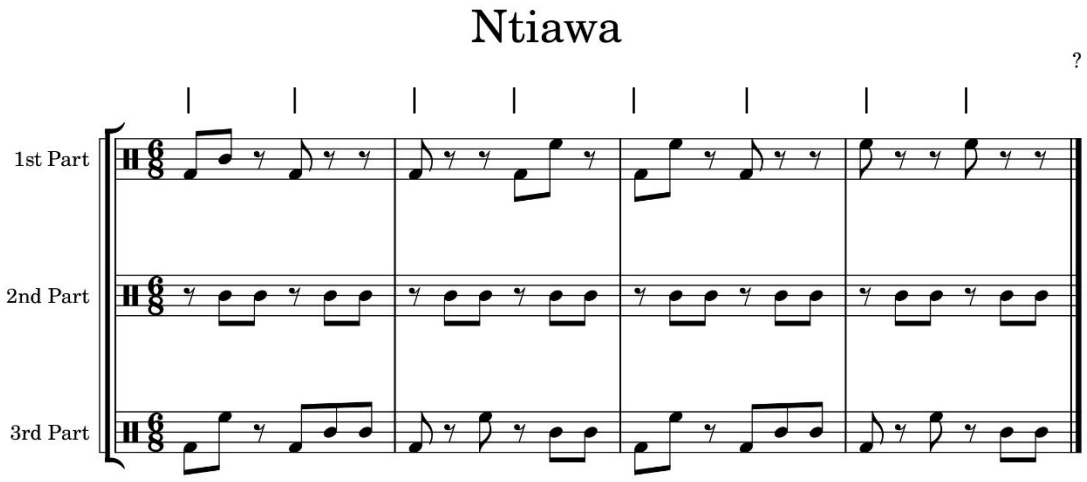
A jazzed up version was taught by Batantou dia N'Kaba on a visit to the U.S. in the early 2000's:

L'Introduction

Taught by Batantou Dia N'Kaba

	!			!			!			!			!			!			!			!			!		
Slap						S	S	S															S		S		
Tone			(T)*	T						T									T	T						T
Bass													B					B				B					
			* pickup																								
	!			!			!			!			!			!			!			!					
Slap			S	S	S															S		S					
Tone	T						T	T		T	T		T			T	T							(T)*			
Bass															B				B								
																								*same pickup as above			

Ntiawa

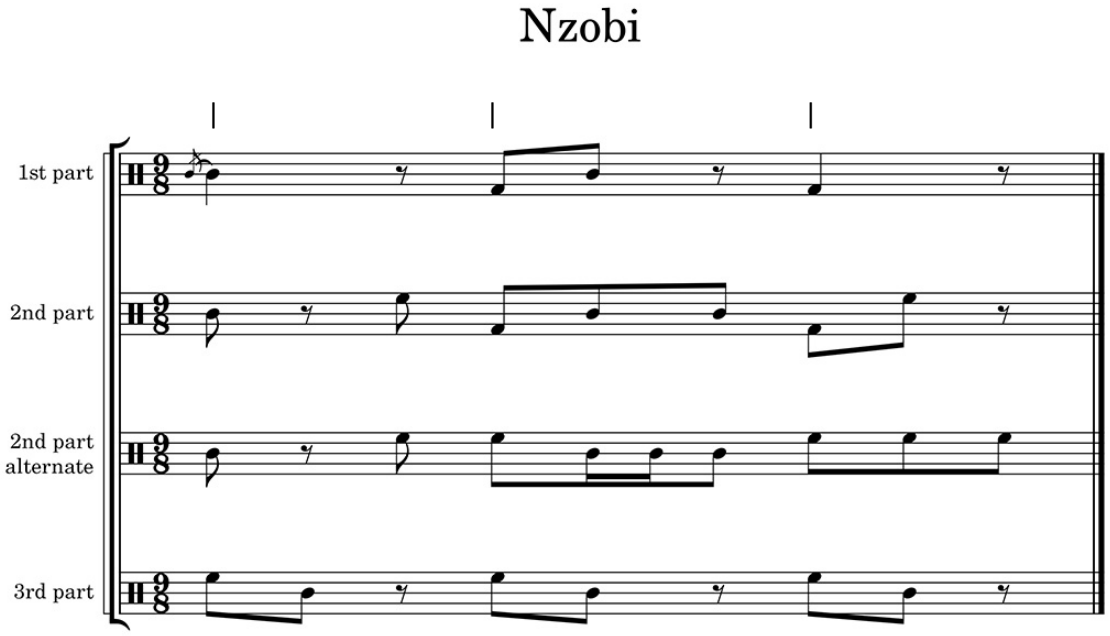
The authors have been unable to find information on the origins of this rhythm. This is a fast rhythms, around 140 beats per minute.



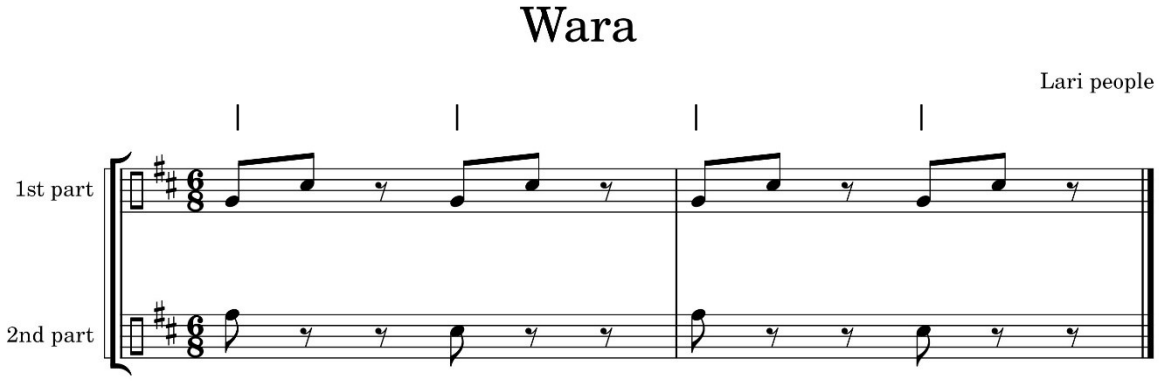
		!			!			!			!			!			!			!			!		
1st part	Slap																			S			S		
	Tone		T									T			T										
	Bass	B			B			B			B			B			B								
2nd part	Slap																								
	Tone		T	T		T	T		T	T		T	T		T	T		T	T		T	T		T	T
	Bass																								
3rd part	Slap		S							S					S							S			
	Tone					T	T					T	T					T	T					T	T
	Bass	B			B			B						B			B			B					

Nzobi

Nzobi is a traditional rhythm originally played by three different ethnic groups in Congo Brazzaville. In the north of the country it is played in the Sangha region by the Mbetis. In the South it is a traditional rhythm in Lekoumou, played by the Mbamba ethnic group and in Niari by the Nzabi. A similar rhythm is played in Cameroon. Nzobi is played in at least two cultural contexts. It is the rhythm of a society in which initiates are committed to live their lives ethically. If they transgress ethical norms they will fall ill or have a mishap. In the other context Nzobi is used in ceremonies to make fetishes that can be kept at someone's home. Then, if someone enters the home for malfeasance, for instance steals something, they will suffer the same fate as the Nzobi initiate who transgresses. Nzobi is also said to sometimes be played in healing ceremonies for people with mental health problems.

The second drum part has two versions, one of which is a little jazzed up compared with the original. With the modified third part the rhythm takes on an other-worldly sound. Nzobi was originally played with sticks but is widely played on the ngoma with the hands. It is not a fast rhythm and is played around 115 beats per minute.

		!			!			!			!			!			!		
1st part	Slap																		
	Tone	tT				T					tT				T				
	Bass				B			B						B			B		
2nd part	Slap			S					S				S					S	
	Tone	T				T	T				T				T	T			
	Bass				B			B						B			B		
2nd part	Slap			S	S			S	S	S			S	S			S	S	S
alternate	Tone	T				TT	T				T				TT	T			
	Bass																		
3rd part	Slap	S			S			S			S			S			S		
	Tone		T			T			T			T			T			T	
	Bass																		

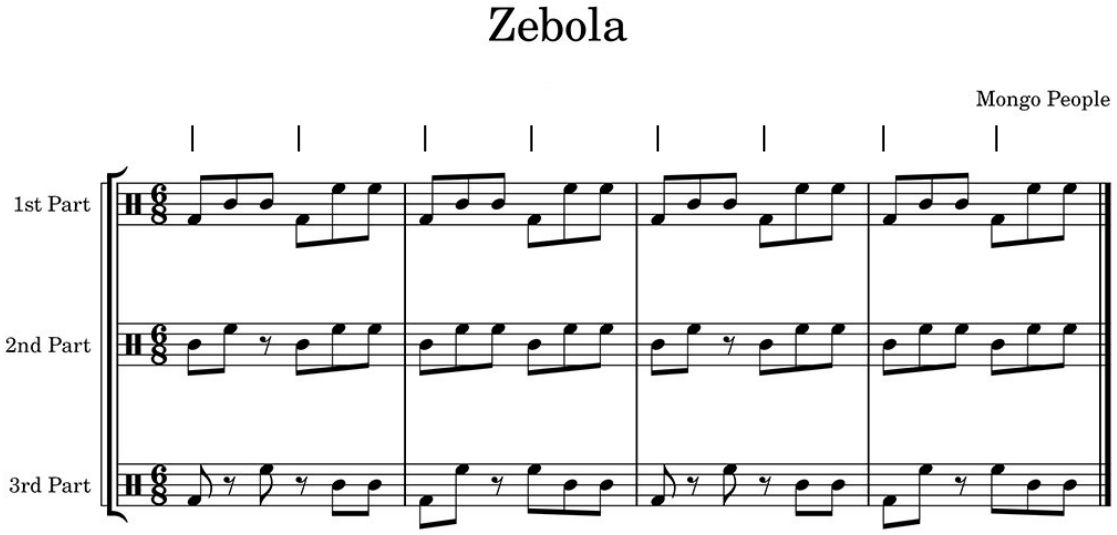
Wara

Wara is a social rhythm and dance mostly played in Southern Congo by the Lari ethnic group. It is played fast – around 155 beats per minute.

		!			!			!			!		
1st part	Slap												
	Tone		T			T			T			T	
	Bass	B			B			B			B		
2nd part	Slap	S						S					
	Tone				T						T		
	Bass												

Zebola

Zebola is a rhythm of the Mongo people of the Pool region (different Pool region from Bouanga) that straddles the Republic of Congo and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) north of Kinshasa. A very popular rhythm, it has been described by sensational Congolese-American dance instructor Mabiba Baegne as “the Congolese national anthem”. It is the rhythm of the Zebola healing tradition, which has been described as a “psychotherapeutic cult for women”, though the term cult as used in Western culture has misleading negative connotations. It might better be called a society. Repeatedly reported in the anthropologic literature, the society is well known to Westerners as an indigenous institution for treating women who suffer from what we might call adjustment disorder. The treatment involves spirit possession and extended living together in an environment that stresses both cultural values and strengthening of the person’s adaptation to life. It could be looked at as similar to an extended Buddhist retreat with a teacher in our culture except that the patient’s whole community is engaged and supports the process. The women who go through the treatment are said to usually end up as good citizens and able to stand up for themselves. The bonding of women who have gone through the Zebola treatment cements a supportive network of friends that lasts a lifetime. Though originating with the Mongo people of the Pool region, this healing tradition has adapted and spread to other parts of Congo, especially the Kinshasa region, where it is a multicultural phenomenon.

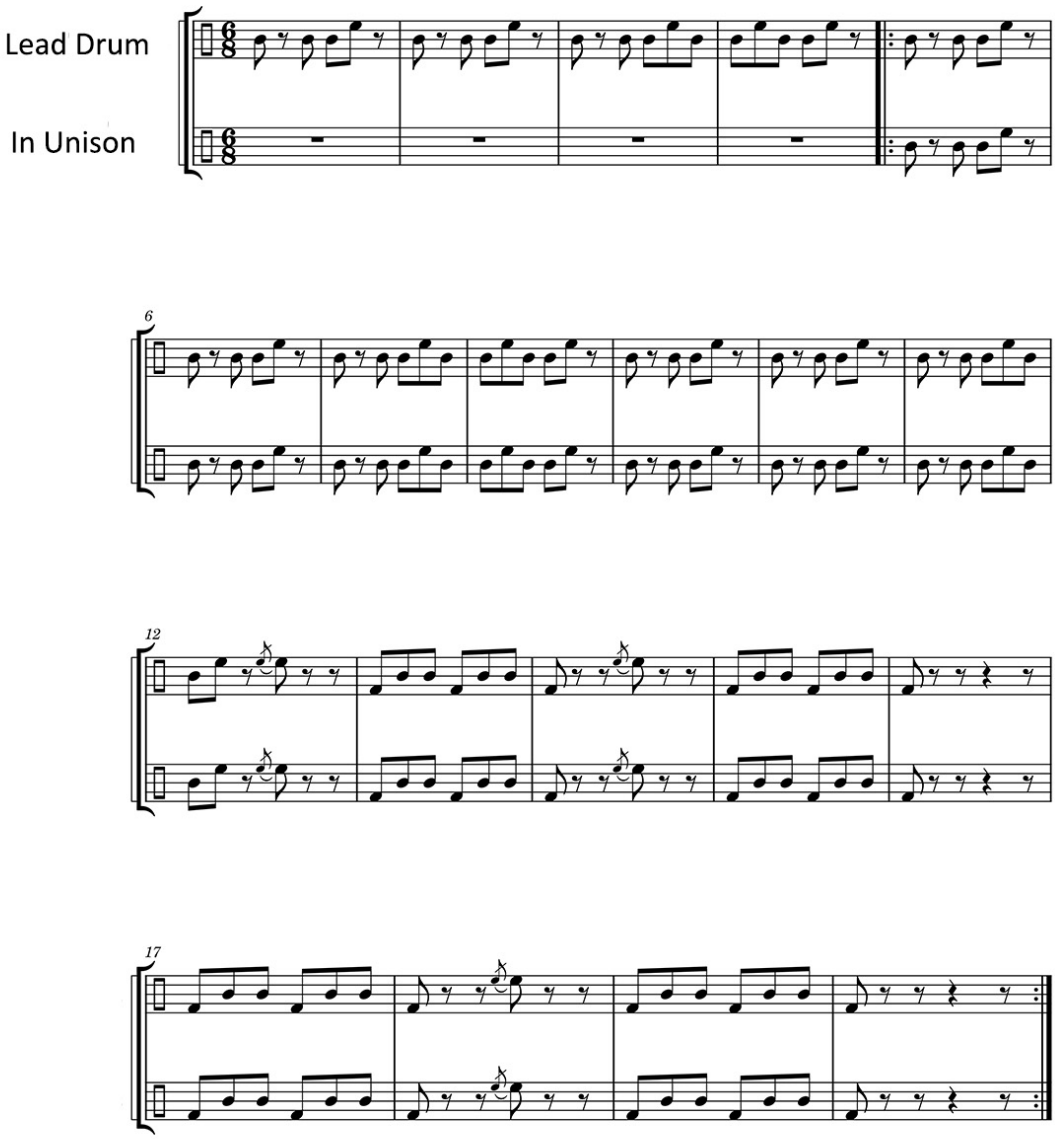
Zebola is traditionally played at a relatively slow tempo at around 105 beats per minute, though sometimes it is played faster.



			!			!			!			!		
1st Part		Slap					S	S		T	T		S	S
		Tone		T	T									
		Bass	B			B			B			B		
2nd Part		Slap		S			S	S		S	S		S	S
		Tone	T			T			T			T		
		Bass												
3rd Part		Slap			S					S		S		
		Tone					T	T					T	T
		Bass	B						B					

In a formal performance situation, the drummers may want to start with an introduction. The one below is frequently used. The drummers in unison would play the introduction twice, then the lead drummer would play the call and everyone would join in with Zebola. Typically, the call would also be used to signal the end of the playing. If the drummers are performing for groups of dancers, the call would also be played to start a group of dancers.

Zebola Lead-In



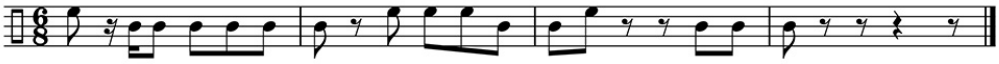
					Intro									
			!			!			!			!		
Lead		Slap					S						S	
		Tone	T		T	T			T		T	T		
		Bass												
		Slap					S			S			S	
		Tone	T		T	T		T	T		T	T		
		Bass												

In unison

	!			!			!			!			
Slap					S						S		
Tone	T		T	T			T		T	T			
Bass													
Slap					S			S			S		
Tone	T		T	T		T	T		T	T			
Bass													
	!			!			!			!			
Slap					S						S		
Tone	T		T	T			T		T	T			
Bass													
Slap					S			S		sS			
Tone	T		T	T		T	T						
Bass													
	!			!			!			!			
Slap										sS			
Tone		T	T		T	T							
Bass	B			B			B						
Slap													
Tone		T	T		T	T							
Bass	B			B			B						
Slap										sS			
Tone		T	T		T	T							
Bass	B			B			B						
Slap													
Tone		T	T		T	T							
Bass	B			B			B						

Slap													
Tone		T	T		T	T							
Bass	B			B			B						

This introduction would be followed by the call.

Zebola Call

	!			!			!				!			
										S	S	S		
Slap	S													
Tone		0 T*	T	T	T	T	T							T
Bass														

Slap		S									(S)			
Tone	T				T	T	T							
Bass														

*Above 0 T indicates the tone beat comes half a beat late for syncopation.

Some lead drummers like to play a slap on the last beat (in parentheses). This is especially used when playing with beginning drummers.

Afterword

This book represents most of the rhythms that have been brought by the Congolese diaspora to the United States. We hope that it will bring some attention to this incredibly beautiful and inspiring musical form and enable musicians to start trying it out. Once the wave of West African drumming plays out in this country, it is likely that both serious musicians and people playing at the drum circle level will become interested in new material. Although ngomas are likely to continue to be hard to acquire and expensive compared with the dundun or djembe, conga drums are perfectly fine for playing Congolese rhythms authentically. Biza Sompa and Bichini Bia Congo used them before they had ngomas. Thus, drum availability is not a problem. People should be cautious about simply playing these rhythms on the popular West African instruments – the djembe and dundun-like drums. The musical traditions are different. The West African ensemble combines the high pitched djembe with lower pitched dundun type drums leaving a gap in the mid range. The Congolese ngoma music uses more subtle differences in pitch within the mid range giving an effect similar to crickets singing in the night. Combining djembe, dundun and ngoma can also be problematic. The djembe has a high pitched tinny sound that can detract from the gravitas and the more mellow sound of ngomas or congas. The dundun type drums are hit with sticks and the booming sound, which is near the same pitch range as ngomas, can drown them out unless the ngoma players are exceptionally loud. However, not everyone has the preferences that are stated here and there are groups in Africa that combine instrumentation effectively.

Experience shows that many of the rhythms mix well with other musical forms to create fresh and interesting sounds. If there is one thing the history of music shows us it is that musical forms continually mix across cultures. Nowhere is this more true than in the United States. Sooner or later the broad U.S. musical heritage will be enriched by these rhythms, which should have been a part of our heritage from the start. The drums were taken away from enslaved people not only because they were the most advanced long distance communication technology of the time. They were also instruments of healing, social coherence, inspiration and strength. The African musical traditions still have these virtues to offer in novel ways to Westerners.

It is often pointed out that some American musical forms (e.g. jazz, R&B, soul, gospel) already include African sensibilities and motifs. This is true. But it is also true that there is still much in traditional African music that is very different from anything usually played in our country. There is a lot of room still for experimentation, creativity and growth. The first part of Ganza, similar to some Caribbean rhythms, goes well with many jazz and rock pieces. Some of the 6/8 rhythms go very well with some gospel pieces. Air Puni parts go well with many funk scores. One time in Durham the drummers of the African American Dance Ensemble, playing in the West African tradition, played with the Chocolate Drops, a Blue Grass group. The sound was astounding. We have noted, too, that the lead drum part of Bouanga goes well with a lot of Blue Grass pieces. Endless other possibilities have been unexplored so far. For instance, the African 6/8 and 9/8 rhythms have hardly been tried.

In contemporary American culture the obvious just lies there until the right personality, Tik Tok post or branding/advertising campaign picks it up. The incredibly rich Congolese drum tradition is here just waiting and when it is noticed, this book will hopefully help it enrich our lives.

About the Authors

Ken Wilson is a Professor Emeritus in the Department of Medicine, Duke University. He grew up outside Chapel Hill, NC and started playing trombone at the age of 14, becoming mostly a jazz trombonist but also playing symphonic works. He also wrote jazz arrangements for small groups. At age 32 he started playing congas then ngoma in the Congolese tradition and has now played in that tradition for 45 years. He serves as Pline Mounzeo's primary accompanist in local gigs and for several years led a group of drummers at the Seymour Senior Center in Chapel Hill. He also systematically studies design of drums made to sound like the Congolese ngoma.

Pline Mounzeo speaks seven languages and has an exhaustive knowledge of Congolese rhythms as well as West African ones. He grew up in Brazzaville, Congo, and learned drumming from his uncle, who was a drummer for the renowned drum ensemble Tambours de Brazza. During his senior year in high school a civil broke out and he had to leave the country when his father, a TV anchorman, was assassinated. He went to Senegal, where he played for Ballet Pierre Sacré and Compagnie Premier Temps, composed of Congolese expatriates playing with Senegalese musicians. He toured with Compagnie Premier Temps in Africa, Europe and the United States and he became a widely respected master drummer in his own right. In 2008 Biza Sompa recruited him to be the drummer for Bichini Bia Congo in Ann Arbor, MI but in 2009 he decided to move to Raleigh, where he had family. Living in Angier, outside of Raleigh, NC, he is considered to be a local treasure (the assessment of the professional drummers who play with us sometimes). He plays locally as well as being a visiting artist in the U.S. and France.

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